

Pedagogical Interventions: Locating Spaces for Teacher Education

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Abstract: Conventionally, teacher education programs are set around the familiar boundaries of fixed courses—curriculum and instruction, psychology, foundations, practicum, and so forth. These elements persist for reasons of logic and habit. How these various components actually work for a student wishing to become a teacher is seldom given much attention in any systematic way. This paper describes some of the insights and practices resulting from an ongoing action research project into the effects of teacher education on professional identity formation. These insights and practices raise questions about the curriculum of teacher education and the pedagogical roles of university teacher educators, faculty consultants, and cooperating teachers.

Introduction

The University of Alberta graduates between eight and nine hundred certificated teachers each year. The University's Faculty of Education has traditionally

been recognized as one of the leading teacher education institutions in Canada. And while teacher education has always constituted a major share of the institution's resources and teaching activities, it does not necessarily command a corresponding share of its research agenda. The teacher education program tends to have tended to operate year-by-year, through a more or less well established selection of university courses and field experience placements. Research attention has tended to lie elsewhere. This is not only a paradoxical situation for a large research university to be in, it can have some serious long-term consequences for the health of the institution and the future of the teacher education program. The program tends to become routine, and the original intention behind housing teacher education at the university is largely lost. Ultimately, there is a danger that the program will become so unresponsive to the day-to-day practice of teaching as to warrant moving it out of the academy altogether.

Concerns for the relevance and renewal of the secondary-route teacher education program prompted the Department of Secondary Education to initiate an action research project in the fall of 1992. As with most action research, this project began with a concern about a specific practice: a particular course in the initial professional term of the secondary-route teacher education program, a course entitled "Teaching in the Secondary School" (EdSec 200). This course occupied a central place in the first professional term, as a connection point of articulation between the campus- and field-based aspects of the term, and yet increasing student dissatisfaction suggested an absence of focus and coherence. Student's complaints about too many topics, and too little consistency between the various sections of the course—which numbered up to 25 sections of 28 students per section—suggested EdSec 200's role in the first professional term needed to be rethought. It was immediately apparent that these complaints over the consistency and focus in a course entitled "Teaching in the Secondary School" was a direct challenge to rethink the direction of the program.

A summary of the subsequent this four-year action research inquiry follows. The guiding questions, insights, and changed practices reported herein are the product of ongoing action and reflection during this period of time. As we formulate this report in January of 1997, as a major revision of the teacher education program at the University of Alberta is about to take place. Our hope is that the insights and changed practices resulting from research conducted that began around EdSec 200, research that later expanded and advanced to include the initial professional term of the secondary-route teacher education program and beyond, will now inform the implementation of the University's teacher education program as a whole.

Historical Context

A sustained practical questioning of the focus of "Teaching in the Secondary School" inevitably raised some fundamental questions about how a person becomes a teacher, and why the university should be is the most appropriate place for teacher education. After all, a certain kind of conventional wisdom questions the very idea of a university-based teacher education faculty of education. Such a query is based on a kind of commonsense logic that considers teaching to comprise of nothing more than the possession of a combination of subject matter knowledge, inborn talent, and practical classroom experience. If this were indeed the case, it would follow that a having a specialized professional school of education at the university would be unnecessary. All that would be required would be to select talented people, give giving them an appropriate academic education, following this up with some apprenticeship training in the public schools. This model of teacher education—teacher education as vocational training—did actually exist in Alberta prior to 1945. At that time prospective teachers were prepared education in one of three provincial Normal Schools—in

Edmonton, Camrose, and Calgary. Such normal school preparation mainly emphasized instruction in school subjects, lesson preparation, and school management.

In considering the appropriateness of the university as a location of teacher education, it is worth noting the reasons advanced for closing the Alberta's three provincial Normal Schools in 1945 and removing the entire responsibility for teacher education to the University of Alberta: one reason was to follow the practice of forming faculties of education within the university, which had become commonplace practice in the United States; in the first decades of the twentieth century. A more substantive reason, was to legitimate education as a social practice by elevating teaching to a profession, through the creation of a professional school within the university.

Yet, as early as 1935, criticisms of university-based professional school models of teacher education began to emerge in the U.S. George S. Counts, for example, noted how such models simply conformed to a "pattern of orientation courses, subject matter courses, theory courses, observation courses, and practice-teaching assignments." Counts was critical of this "combination-of-courses" approach as being "but a conglomeration of precepts and practices inherited from the more limited environment of a former day." And yet as we began the action research project, the pattern observed by Counts was uncannily familiar. EdSec 200 proved to be a "theory course"—in curriculum and instruction—offered concurrently with certain "orientation courses"—in educational foundations and educational psychology—and "subject matter courses"—in the students' minor area of studies—courses that preceded a "practice teaching assignment." In light of this historical context, we realized recent criticisms regarding this course-based approach to teacher education were far from new. Our challenge to improve the secondary education program seemed an old one.

Cycles of Action Research

Our initial action research questions began by probing the students' concerns that EdSec 200 should have a tighter and more consistent structure and a narrower focus: on the essential elements of teaching. Which were the essential elements of teaching? And, just as importantly, which elements were extraneous? What should EdSec 200 contribute to the larger purpose of becoming a teacher? Somewhat predictably, our research identified three essential aspects of teaching: teaching methods, lesson preparation, and classroom management. We also found that the four week practicum—the “teaching assignment” portion of the term—was regarded by the students as being to be the most important aspect of the entire initial professional term. EdSec 200 was criticized for not being closely enough connected to the practicum, as were the three other courses that comprise the initial professional term—educational psychology, educational foundations, and, to a lesser extent, the subject matter courses. Students also criticized these four campus-based courses for failing to communicate adequately with one another. The overall message was that students did not experience the initial professional term as a coherent whole but as a collection of discrete nine-week courses that preceded but contributed little to a four-week, in-school teaching assignment.

Cycles of action research commenced in 1992 with adjustments to the course content and a reduction to the numbers of topics in Ed Sec 200. Efforts were also undertaken made to link EdSec 200 more explicitly to the teaching practicum and to reconceptualize the practicum as a “field experience.” This change in language from “practicum” to “field experience” was meant to deconstruct the notion that the university is the location of theory and the schools are the sites of practice. The intention was to establish two equally legitimate sites of teacher education: the university classroom and the school classroom. This would prompt students to begin

considering their preparation in terms of “negation” and a “dialectical progression,” as opposed to a traditional incremental, linear model of learning. In a dialectical progression, “the ‘negation’ (Aufhebung) of an earlier stage does not mean the disappearance of that stage, but rather its preservation in some other form.” Consequently, while “a naive linear view often implies sharp breaks with one’s history,” a dialectical view, posits stages of development that are never left behind but “continue to exist after they have been passed through, and succeeding stages are built upon preceding ones without destroying them.”¹

A sustained series of action research cycles were to follow over the next eight terms—between the fall of 1992 and the fall of 1996. During this period, adjustments continued within the Ed Sec 200 course to refine the focus on lesson preparation, teaching methodologies, and classroom management. Instructional aids, such as the “commonplace book,” were devised to encourage observation and reflection, while opportunities for practice and to learn from experience were increasingly highlighted. In the university classroom, practice was centred on through peer teaching. Opportunities to learn from practice in actual secondary schools classrooms was facilitated by moving the field experience—the “teaching assignment” portion of the initial professional term— from the end to the middle of the term. This move enabled EdSec 200 and the other campus-based courses to incorporate students’ field experiences more directly into their course content. Finally, dialogue was opened up among the instructors of the various courses in the initial professional term. Regular meetings were held to discuss how EdSec 200, educational psychology, educational foundations, and the subject matter curriculum and instruction courses could better communicate and reflect the nature of learning and teaching.

¹ Michael S. Roth, *Psycho-Analysis as History: Negation and Freedom in Freud* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1995, 24; 82)

The active and reflective nature of action research enabled a simultaneous program change and the development of new insights into the process of becoming a teacher. A number of these insights have been incorporated as new practices in the courses that now comprise the initial secondary-route professional term. With the implementation of the new teacher education program beginning in the fall of 1997, we feel that it is important that some of the major insights of this four year project be documented to facilitate their incorporation into the new teacher education program.

Research Insights

1. Learning to Become a Teacher

The major insight our four-year action research project has provided is the understanding of the factors that contribute to the formation of teachers. Experienced teachers have long understood that possessing a particular set of skills and knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition of good teaching. Teaching is not, therefore, a matter of personal qualities, as the phrase “teachers are born and not made” might suggest. It is a combination of personal and professional knowledge, but we realized that the degree and nature of this personal/professional mix had been neither acknowledged nor addressed in any consistent way in our teacher education practice. As our action research project proceeded, we began to realize that the Faculty of Education had become trapped by its own language. The proclamation that the Faculty of Education “teaches teachers” is already inherently misleading, because it implies that individuals are taught a common set of skills and a body of general knowledge that transforms them into teachers. Instead we have come to appreciate more fully the significance of the teaching encounter— of the affective aspects of teaching that confront student teachers during their in-school teaching assignments. These encounters are of crucial importance to teacher education.

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Because the practice of teaching is tied so closely to the personal biography of the teacher, professional knowledge, when imparted to student teachers, affects not only what they do, but it becomes part of who one is. Upon entering the teacher education program, students begin to live a life that now also includes teaching. This differs markedly from the simple acquisition of skill sets and a body of knowledge that will somehow, after four years of study, transform them into a teacher. This observation implies that becoming a teacher is a lifelong process. Formal entrance into the teacher education program introduces students to this process by providing a groundwork that includes a professional orientation to teaching and helping to chart directions for future growth. In this respect Deborah Britzman's term "teaching chronologies"² has proven especially enlightening. Britzman's teaching chronologies challenge students to relate their experiences of the university teacher education program as one chronology which lies between their past, formative educational experiences and their future, potential induction into the teaching profession. This sets the stage for students "to see more clearly the patterns of the past in the present," to begin "making sense of the past in the present" in a way that "does not rely on some notion of the essential continuity of change over time: an "idea of '*making meaning*' that does not project some transcendental guarantee or stable signification," but which "emphasizes that meanings... are the product of an always already changing present in confrontation with a significant past that shifts in relation to the present"³ (Roth 123-124, emphasis added).

2. Remystifying the Practice of Teaching

² Deborah Britzman outlines four chronologies of teaching: 1) initial educational experiences, 2) university teacher education, 3) practicum experiences, and 4) the first three or four years of professional induction. She argues that these four chronologies are crucial in professional identity formation. See D. Britzman *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, 59).

³ Roth, *Psycho-Analysis as History*, 123-124, emphasis added.

We have learned that preconceived opinions about teaching lie at the root of many of the frustrations with the program. Student teachers, like most members of the general public, believe they already know all there is to know about teaching from having observed many teachers during their elementary, junior high, and high school years of formal schooling. Such an “over-familiarity” with teaching sets our profession apart from other less public professions like as medicine, law, or engineering. But what “this intellectuallist rationalization, created by science and by scientifically oriented technology, means practically,” is not, according to sociologist Max Weber, “a greater knowledge of the conditions of life under which we exist,” but something else: “knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” It is this decidedly modern “demystification” of complex practices that prompted Weber to declare “that the world is disenchanted.”⁴ This seeming self-evident conception of teaching leads to the erroneous conclusion that learning to teach comprises of nothing more than subject matter competence, a repertoire of instructional skills, and the ability to keep good order in the classroom. Such attributes which can be best mastered by individuals through a simple transfer of knowledge and skills, or so the argument goes.

Teaching competency cannot be obtained by the simple transference of knowledge and skills. Competent teaching derives from highly contingent knowledge that is hard won through thoughtful experience and the tactful application of skills. As Shoshana Felman notes: “Teaching, thus, is not the transmission of ready-made knowledge. It is rather the creation of a new condition of knowledge, the creation of an original learning

⁴ Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1979): 139.

disposition” that “teaches the condition that makes it possible to learn.” But this entails the exercise of a certain kind of knowledge that “cannot be acquired (or possessed) once and for all,” that “cannot be exchanged, it has to be used—and used in each case differently, according to the singularity of the case.”⁵ The fact that teaching is “knowledge which cannot be exchanged” is undoubtedly the greatest source of frustration for both student teachers and teacher educators. Student teachers are disappointed that they cannot be taught basic skills which will protect them from the problems and the contingencies of the classroom and ; teacher educators feel themselves increasingly driven to supply general solutions to problems that will always arise in, and remain specific to, particular classrooms. Accepting that teaching is premised on knowledge that is contingent and situational gives new purpose to the dialectical links between the off-campus teaching field experience and the campus-based courses that comprise the first professional term.

3. Discerning the Discourse of the University

A third insight resulting from our action research project: is a clearer insight into how the university works, first and foremost, as a promulgator of official knowledge, and how these workings frustrate, rather than promote the process of teacher education. While Jacques Lacan distinguishes the discourse of the university—the promulgation of a rational and hence neutral body of knowledge—from the discourse of the master—the forceful imposition of unsubstantiated dogma, of a master signifier—he reveals the support or truth of the former to be none other than the master signifier of the latter. It is through the discourse of the university, in the guise of objective, generalizable knowledge, that the master signifier, the rule of law, is legitimated and reproduced. University knowledge is constituted around master

⁵ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987, 80-81)

signifiers. This is authoritative knowledge, meant to be regarded as true. As "the truth", this knowledge is reconstituted in terms of generalizable, and thus exchangeable truths, to be dispensed in a manner that legitimates its application to all and any authoritatively and applied to new situations. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that those of us within the institution consistently find ourselves constrained to dispense authoritative knowledge about teaching, knowledge to be taken up as "truths" which explain learning, lesson planning, classroom management, and so forth.

The adoption of a reflective orientation to reflective practice in EdSec 200 and moving the field experience to the centre of the professional term—are the direct result of our efforts to address the contingencies and self-formative aspects of teaching. The fact that initial attempts to institute these more reflective approaches were initially greeted as the imposition of a new master signifier reflects how the discourse of the university limits possibilities for change. We continue to push against these limitations to open up spaces for student teachers to encounter teaching and negotiate their teaching identities. Alternative spaces of this sort continue to be difficult to develop and maintain against, especially given the press of the course requirements of the separate courses offered by various university departments continue to set, requirements that are, as a matter of habit, constituted around authoritative knowledge.

4. The Place of the Teacher Educator

The fourth and final insight resulting from our research has been into conclusion relates to insights about we have gained about our own conduct as teacher educators. If becoming a teacher is primarily a matter of self-consciously negotiating a teaching identity through a combination of information, practice, and reflection, then the place of the teacher educator cannot be exclusively in front of a class in a lecture theatre. While this is the place most familiar to the instructors in the university, it is not the

place that pedagogically best serves to guide the negotiation of a teaching identity. Negotiating a teaching identity requires a pedagogical process that both precedes and continues beyond the walls of the university.

Rather than being in the lecture theatre or the seminar room, the pedagogical space that the teacher educator occupies lies between the academy and the public school. The school experience is never simply “practice teaching”; it is an intense encounter which awakens and activates a range of reflections, responses, and insights in the student teacher, insights that are crucial to the formation of her or his teaching identity. Significant teacher education is happening in the school experience. If the university does not sufficiently acknowledge this experience, and work with it pedagogically, then the so-called separation of theory and practice is confirmed in the mind of the student teacher. Such an occasioning not only has the effect of fragmenting teacher education, it also leaves untouched the highly problematic transposition of knowledge and experience.

The space between the academy and the public school is an ambivalent and uncomfortable place in which to be. Teacher educators must constantly negotiate university expectations of scholarly teaching and research with the establishment of an appropriate relationship with teachers in the school system if they are to intervene pedagogically in the formation of teachers.

Appendix

1996/1997 Focus of Ed Sec 200 in Phase Two

1. Ed Sec 200 topics:

- lesson preparation & teaching approaches (presentation, cooperative learning, self-directed, inquiry).
- classroom management.
- focus teaching

2. Central (homeroom) role in Phase Two Term:

- Friday school visits
- Field experience placements
- Reflection on becoming a teacher

3. Assessment & Grading:

- Commonplace Book (20%)
- Presentation of a Teaching Idea (10%)
- Focus Teaching (30%)
- IPT Project (40%)

4. Field Experience:

- school field experience coordinators
- university facilitators

5. Term Schedule:

- see attached calendars
- pod meetings (Tuesdays at 3pm. ?)

